

Richard Barnett

LETTER FROM RIO

"Fairly cruel but sensible policies"

A few months ago, I would hear every week of some personal friend or acquaintance who had just been tortured. Many of my former students have been subjected to electric shock, beaten and had their bones broken by the police, and they killed my best friend in an interrogation session. But now you hear less about torture. There are not many people left worth torturing. —An intellectual critic

Of course the economic miracle will continue. This is a rich country with tremendous opportunities and we have found the way to develop. —A retired admiral

THE BRAZILIAN REVOLUTION, which recently celebrated its eighth birthday, is a unique political phenomenon. Although Brazil is now run largely by the Army with the aid of the police, it is neither a conventional police state nor a traditional Latin American military government. Nor, for most of the people who live there, is it an "economic miracle." Between the torture rate and the growth rate there is a profound and subtle connection. The generals who hold Brazil in a more effective grip than exists in any government elsewhere in Latin America worship economic development. They are prepared to achieve it through a judicious mixture of official terrorism, modern techniques of propaganda and social control, and what former Minister of Economic Planning Roberto Campos calls "bucancer capitalism."

In every conversation I had in Brazil, whether with generals, high government officials, corporation presidents, professors, or students, it was evident that police torture was much on their minds. One can gain an instant and, I suspect, reasonably accurate impression of some of the

major competing forces in Brazilian life by listening to what people say about torture.

The official government attitude concedes that some "excesses" may have occurred, but insists that torture is not a policy. Indeed, Jarbas Passarinho, the Minister of Education, well over a year ago publicly denounced torture, and at least one brigadier general was transferred in mild disgrace because he had authorized the use of electric shock treatment on political prisoners. At the same time the generals with whom I talked took obvious pride in the "stability" that had been achieved by their "strong measures." "In 1964," one admiral said, "our country was on the brink of collapse: terrorism, bank robberies, Communists in the government, and a 94 per cent rate of inflation. The Revolution brought the discipline and order essential for economic progress."

There are signs that the rulers of Brazil are divided about the most effective techniques of social control. Some favor putting more emphasis on the rack, others on the TV tube. One indication of this tension is the history of the Revolution itself. The first generation of generals, who seized power in 1964, were, within the spectrum of Brazilian military politics, liberals. The first president, General Castelo Branco, though prepared to take strong action against any political activity identified as "subversion," looked forward to the relaxation of military rule.

The state elections of 1965 destroyed those hopes. The opposition candidates did too well; under pressure from the right-wing generals

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more authoritarian, and less concerned about maintaining a constitutional facade) Castelo Branco assumed extensive dictatorial powers. In 1968 a leftist movement began to grow in the universities, and there was a blight of bank robberies and urban terrorism that culminated in the kidnapping of the American ambassador. The government of Costa e Silva, in power since 1966, responded with the suspension of habeas corpus and the blatant use of torture.

I talked with a prominent banker and plantation owner who was enthusiastic about the tough measures the government had employed to curb inflation, defeat terrorism, and promote growth. For him there was no doubt that anyone who had suffered, any unpleasantness at the hands of the police deserved it. None of his friends had encountered the slightest trouble. He agreed that the government had been able to keep inflation down only by breaking the power of the unions and controlling wages. (There has been no legal strike in Brazil since 1964. The few illegal strikes were ruthlessly repressed.) "Foreigners don't understand that we need a strong government here. The people are not ready for your kind of democracy." At my suggestion that perhaps the government was now secure enough to return to a system of direct elections, he became agitated. "There won't be elections for a long time and there shouldn't be. The Communists would win." With only an official government party and an official opposition permitted and the Communist party illegal, his fears seemed irrational, but the emotion in his voice left no doubt that they were real.

For intellectuals, would-be political activists, and students, the police torture has succeeded in imposing a code of behavior. After almost four years of systematic sadism, the lines are now clear. No one in Brazil doubts that pain is a persuasive instrument of social control. Official terrorism has succeeded brilliantly for two reasons. First, the government has made it clear that it will resort to any methods, no matter how barbarous, to discourage associations it considers dangerous. It has used such spectacular methods as loosing a live alligator on a young woman who would not talk. The deterrent effect is obvious. People refrain to comply in their closest friends for fear that they will reveal